

Room of One's Own: 1920s Feminist Utopias

... it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry (Woolf 1984).

One Day it came to me strong and clear—the end of all desires, the longing beneath all longing; and there shaped in my dreams a little room with white walls, clear white-washed walls, and bare floor boards, set far away on the brow of a hill I have never seen, remote, inaccessible (Woodward 1983).

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1 Rodaway 1985:56, 145–6, for example, describes her dream house and room of her own where she put her typewriter and ‘felt that I had, that day, flown out of the orbit of the world’. See also Dyhouse 1995:ch.3.

2 The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists a middle-English meaning for the word ‘feeling’: sensibility of the whole body. Woolf’s understanding of the sources of feeling and thought included both body and mind.

IRGINIA Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* was written in several drafts in 1928 and 1929, the year in which women in Britain won the suffrage on the same terms as men. Woolf’s wish for £500 a year and a room of her own was spoken in the name of those ‘uneducated’ women who would write fiction. But the wish had a wider resonance. It was repeated in a fictional autobiography, Kathleen Woodward’s *Jipping Street*, the story of a working-class childhood in Bermondsey, London, published in 1928, and the autobiographies and memories of the generations of women who grew up in Britain during the first decades of the twentieth century echo similar longings.¹ Why did this wish for a room emerge in the 1920s? What does it tell us about the political affect—the passions—of feminism in those years? Living writers express, in Woolf’s words, ‘a feeling that is actually being made and torn out of us at the moment’ (1984:15). I want to catch hold of the feelings behind the wish for a room of one’s own; to ask what was their genesis and form, and why did they press so powerfully into the consciousness of those women at that time.²

The rooms in the minds’ eyes of Woolf and Woodward sprang from different circumstances—a Bloomsbury drawing room, a south London slum—but in one of several uncanny filiations between the texts, Woolf calls up the unknown lives of women in ‘one of those long streets somewhere

south of the river whose infinite rows are innumerably populated'. Imagining those lives with neither pity nor condescension (familiar habits of mind of the philanthropist, the socialist and too often her own suffragist generation) Woolf will not speak for the working woman. She is curious to hear their stories.³ Woolf conjures 'in imagination the pressure of dumbness, the accumulation of unrecorded life' that 'no biography or history has a word to say about . . .' (1984:85).⁴ Jipping Street before the First World War, where the 'I' of Kathleen Woodward's fictional autobiography grew up, was such a street, 'winding', 'long and narrow', lined with broken-down houses, 'shrill and unresting'.⁵ The daughter of a washerwoman who scrubbed floors and a semi-invalid father, the circumstances of her mother's life, Woodward tells us in her opening sentence, were no different from those of the 'inarticulate people without number who compose the "lower" classes' (1983:3,24–5,31).⁶

In the 1920s, the lower classes were not 'dumb'. Their dumbness anyway had only ever been a fantasy—literary or otherwise—of some Victorian and Edwardian journalists. Nineteenth-century feminists who identified with the poor acted out or ventriloquized the speech and thoughts of the poor—a process that contributed a sort of melodrama of poverty to much of their public rhetoric.⁶ Women from different classes seldom spoke to each other except as maid and employer. We know from diaries and letters the force of these conversations—encounters made anxious by enforced intimacy—and their impress on the mind.⁷ Speech and education divided rich and poor. The exceptional girl from a poor background who won a place at university was often hungry, compelled to refine herself, and if in a hall of residence waited on by armies of maids (Dyhouse 1995). Nevertheless, one of the effects of post-suffrage feminism was that working-class women's experience began to be not only observed and imagined but listened to, written down—often by themselves—and published. This was the first generation to be fully literate. The feminine demotic shaped twentieth-century knowledge and aspiration in concrete ways.

The Women's Co-operative Guild, for example, before 1914, had elicited information from its participants on divorce, maternity provision, family budgets and life histories. This information exchanged and discussed in local groups, written in letters, entered the rhetoric of delegates to the annual conferences ('women's parliaments') which, together with other testimony gathered by the Women's Labour League, the National Federation of Women Workers, the Fabian Women's Group, the Women's Industrial Council, the Open Door Council, the Six Point Group and other *ad hoc* women's organizations, was given as evidence to parliamentary committees, influenced legislation and generated new collective identities and institutions.⁸ The Royal Commission on Divorce (1911–12) for example, whose brief was the sanctity of marriage, addressed the question of poverty of women and children within marriage. The reports of the Royal Commission of Industrial

3 Woolf parodies the do-gooder in Miss Sea, the suffrage office worker in *Night and Day* (Woolf 1981:76). Why are there no maids in the *DNB*, she asked (Woolf 1977:186).

4 Woolf repeated the point about 'our ignorance of the working classes' in 'The Niece of an Earl' (1928)(1993:95).

5 Her evocation of South London may well have been prompted by the Fabian Women's Group investigation into housekeeping in Lambeth (Reeves 178).

6 W. T. Stead's (editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*) inventive political alliance with Josephine Butler (Walkowitz 1992:ch.3).

7 Woolf famously describes conversations with the cook as evidence of changed human relations after the First World War in 'Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown' (Woolf 1992a).

8 These and other working women's organizations formed the Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Industrial Organizations in 1917 which continued through the Second World War.

Unrest (1917) recorded men's discontent with the domestic upheavals of their wives' war-time work; studies of the war economy recorded women's industrial position, skills and needs. The value of women's labour to the standard of living of the family was acknowledged in the report of the Balfour Committee on Trade and Industry at the end of the 1920s, the Pilgrim Trust's study of the unemployed in the 1930s and Henri Fuss's analysis of Britain in the Depression (1935). Just as the narrative drive in modern fiction and poetry worked through the rhythms, tones and timbres of women's voices, so too, as women entered the civil service and professions, women's experience of everyday life modulated the language of reform (Koven and Michel 1990, Lewis 1994).⁹

After the war, too, information of women's needs generated new institutions, such as birth control clinics, mother and child clinics, and white-collar women's trade unions. Norman and Vera Himes, reporting on the findings of the first birth control clinics, were surprised to discover the intelligence and practical good sense of women visited in their own homes. Marie Stopes planned her clinics with the dignity and privacy of the working-class woman in mind, and in *Mother England* reprinted women's letters recounting their experience of childbirth (Stopes 1929, Himes and Himes 1929, Cohen 1993). Women's admission into the professions changed practice. Doctors began listening to women. Psychoanalysis in the 1920s, while it remained marginal to psychiatry in Britain, created new institutions for training and treatment that deliberately intervened in pedagogy. Psychoanalysis, which recruited men and women from the medical professions, spiritualism, theosophy (each claiming to be a science of the mind) and suffragism, had begun with doctors listening to women. These 'intimate conversations', in Elaine Showalter's phrase, which claimed to reveal the dynamics of the inner world of the mind, and which radically rethought the relationship between the mind and the body, took the feminine psyche as the lens for human nature. Kathleen Woodward's taut, tense fictional memoir and Virginia Woolf's reticence both belonged to the new democratic genres.

Woolf's room was a wish for freedom of mind, independence of property and body from fathers and husbands, professors and judges, all men of power and wealth who would tell women what to do. Woodward's was a plea for escape from the claustrophobia, abjection and narrow-mindedness of poverty. The wish for a room in which to think and perhaps to write was a wish for an individual Utopia, a momentary withdrawal from human relationships, an intense self-centredness rare for women. The room was a demand for a place for reverie, to study in peace, to reflect, for somewhere to discover other worlds alone. This aloneness and oneness set the wish apart from the belief in free love, the worker's state or world peace, three other feminist Utopias of the 1920s, each of which imagined new forms of human—sexual, economic and international—relationships. It was also a

⁹ Naomi Mitchison, Dora Russell and Margaret Cole, for example, advocated free love. Cf. Lucy Bland's discussion of the *Freewoman* (Bland 1995:ch.7). See also Pankhurst 1921.

deliberate rejection of the nightmare of forced domestic life—a dystopia fictionalized in Ibsen's *The Doll's House* (1888) and Cecily Hamilton's *Marriage is a Trade* (1909), and the novel closest to Woolf's own experience of the treatment of mental illness, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). In both cases the wish was closer to the concrete, pragmatic demands of the women's movement than it first appears. Woolf apologized for her 'prosaic' demand, predicated on women's 'right to earn', the only right worth having, she thought; and Woodward's wish was grounded in the miseries of poverty. The wish was unthinkable without the women's movement about which politics, nevertheless, both authors felt as ambivalent as they did towards their own femininity.

If the women's movement had lost its unity after the vote, if during the late 1920s and early 1930s, feminists in Britain described themselves as such only with 'reluctance' then it was not only because the 'enthusiasm' had faded after 1914 (the word was Sylvia Pankhurst's), but that real changes in women's lives—release from child-bearing, poverty, dependence on fathers and husbands—proved difficult and slow to achieve. Education, widows' pensions, guardianship of children, the rate for the job, maternal allowances, birth control and a national maternity service were feminist responses to the needs of women, and legislation in the 1920s extended schooling, opened the professions and more university degrees to women, established mother and child clinics, introduced widows' pensions, and granted some rights of guardianship to mothers. But these were partial reforms; none was achieved without compromise, and the legislation was enacted in the context of a debate about women's worth as citizens.

All three major parties endorsed a family in which fathers and husbands remained the legal and economic head. If the Conservative Party under Stanley Baldwin's leadership offered the most comfortable vision of the family, with the wife and mother at home, then the Labour Party—which tens of thousands of women joined through the 1920s—subscribed as wholeheartedly to the image of the 'woman in the little house'.¹⁰ A strain of misogyny ran through socialist thought in the period. The Liberal Party's individualism had always stopped short at women's civil liberties: in so far as the room was a demand for real space for independent women, it added an awkward and unwanted inflection to Lloyd George, the Liberal Party leader's, post-war rallying cry, 'homes for heroes'.¹¹ Meanwhile, women themselves were waiting for neither legislation nor rooms of their own to change their lives: they were simply refusing to have as many children. These books in their different ways were written out of—breathed the same air as—that refusal as surely as the falling birth-rate (the 'birth-strike') and the 'epidemic of abortions' in the early twentieth century (Stopes 1929:184).

One purpose of this essay then is to underline the ways in which individual thought and memory draw on a wider mentality—Woolf's

¹⁰ *The Woman in the Little House* (1922) was the title of a book by Leonora Eyles, woman's editor of the *Daily Herald* throughout the 1920s.

¹¹ Thanks to David Feldman for this point.

‘thinking in common, thinking by the body of the people’ (1984:63). Like so many of her contemporaries, Woolf was preoccupied with the relation and tensions between the individual and society/civilization, a question that divided liberals and socialists as well as feminists in the 1920s (cf. Keynes 1972). There is an inevitable tension in Woolf’s thought between the need for and value of solitude and thinking in common—a sometimes powerful social capacity that runs up against the way in which feelings—distilled and intense in the individual—diminish, lose intensity and purpose in public speech: hence the need for new political languages and forms that both books imply.

What follows are some provisional readings of women’s needs and fears; of men, authority and politics; of sex and its dangers as they were thought by two women in 1928. In so far as these needs and fears fill out the emotional contours of feminism (and women’s longing for change in their lives), their revelations of the inner world of the feminine self expose the limits of politics. These tensions—between what women wanted and what politics could deliver in the 1920s—drove early twentieth-century modernity, if modernity in this period was to do with the expansion of democracy, fewer children, economic crisis and the volatile gap between need and demand.

Women and Poverty

Virginia Woolf’s reflections on the theme of women and fiction were given as lectures at Newnham and Girton, the two women’s colleges in Cambridge, in October 1928, and she made much of the comparative wealth of the men’s and women’s colleges—partridges versus prunes, wine versus water, and the power of partridges and wine on conversation, the flow of talk and thought: ‘... a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well’ (1984:19).¹² Always interested in writing, and women’s wish to write, believing that writing helped thought, Woolf wanted to know why had women written so little in the past, what were the conditions conducive to women’s writing, what was the necessary state of mind for creative work (1984:55). By the end of her six lectures she concluded where she had begun, with the effects of poverty on the mind:

That is it. Intellectual freedom depends upon material things . . . And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time (1984:103).

Women were poor because they were uneducated, and they were uneducated because they were poor.¹³ There were no women’s colleges endowed by wealthy women because women’s mothers and grandmothers had been too busy bearing and raising children to make fortunes. Making money and

12 The original two lectures were never found. ‘Women and Fiction’ was published in the United States in *Forum* March 1929. The impersonal singular was not used until the first draft for the published version (Woolf 1992a:xx–xxi).

13 This formulation echoes Mary Macarthur’s dictum that women were underpaid because they were unorganized, and unorganized because they were underpaid. Mary Macarthur was the secretary of the National Federation of Women Workers (1906–19).

children don't combine. Uneducated women, like Woolf herself, without children could scrape a few pounds

by cadging odd jobs from newspapers . . . by addressing envelopes, reading to old ladies, making artificial flowers, teaching the alphabet to small children in a kindergarten. Such were the chief occupations that were open to women before 1918 (1984:37).¹⁴

But the work was slavish and poorly recompensed, and, worse, was accompanied by fear and bitterness.

Fear and bitterness, Woolf argued, stood in the way of idleness, observation and thought, which were necessary for the writer if she were to free her imagination to develop opinions. Thinking, for Woolf, was the outcome of looking and letting the mind wander where it would. Like fishing, thinking depended on time, chance, strength and skill, and money could trigger this capacity; miraculously money could bring about a change in thinking, a change in human nature. Woolf framed her polemic around an unearned income, an imaginary legacy from an aunt, and she was being greedy. Her legacy, twice the estimated income of a middle-class family in the 1920s, would have paid for travel, books and a servant as well as rent and clothing.¹⁵ It was amazing she wrote, what a change of temper a fixed income could bring:

. . . indeed my aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky (1984:39).¹⁶

Both Woolf's polemic and Woodward's fictional autobiography are diatribes against poverty and laments for women's wasted lives. Wasted through illness, too many children and lack of education; but wasted too because their own selves were obscured or smothered by the needs of others and, Woolf added, women's self-defeating need for the approval of men. She aligned herself, equivocally, within a feminist tradition that was critical of a conventional femininity. Women lacking education and an independent income were the seeming sex; women mirrored men's self-conceit: 'mirrors', she wrote, 'were essential to all violent and heroic action'; women veiled themselves, and were so 'terribly accustomed to concealment' (1984:35, 37, 49, 81).¹⁷ Echoing 'Sophia' in the 1740s, Mary Wollstonecraft in the 1790s and John Stuart Mill in the 1860s, she remarks that we cannot know what women will be until they are educated to do more than please men and seek a husband. In 1919—the 'sacred year' (Woolf 1977:117)—women had been permitted by law to enter the professions. When women are educated to earn, 'in about a hundred years time', they will cease to be the 'protected' sex. Indeed, women may cease to exist at all . . . (Woolf 1984:40).

Woolf's projection of the end of womanhood was conceived in the British

14 Women householders over thirty had won the vote in 1918. Dressmaking, textiles and domestic service were the largest of women's occupations according to the 1931 Census; white-collar work had been expanding since the 1870s.

15 A 1934 survey of unmarried girls and women in the County of London defined middle-class homes as those in which the parents were earning over £225 a year. Just under half of the women earned between 25 and 60 shillings, as clerks, shop assistants, teachers (Bowley 1934).

16 Woolf's unearned income when she married Leonard Woolf in 1912 was £400 a year. Their expenditure was £700 to £800 a year (Lee 1997:325).

17 This understanding of femininity prefigures Joan Riviere's (Riviere 1992).

Museum Reading Room and written in her semi-basement Bloomsbury study.¹⁸ Woodward's plea was written from the inside of poverty. Woolf *knew* from looking and reading that labour, ignorance and servility—the conditions of most women's lives—did not produce poets; Woodward told us why not and what poverty *felt* like. Insecurity and uncertainty were the 'heritage' of the poor; poverty bred grief, want and an inexhaustible, terrifying patience. Woodward 'marvelled' at women's capacity for suffering. Child-birth, factory work, ill health brought no joy, no hope and no redemption. Suffering was not a source of renewal, but a harbinger of death—death of the body, and of the soul: 'I found myself for ever dwelling on the sufferings of the women about me. I was oppressed, suffocated by them' (Woodward 1983:97–9). She reserves her deepest anger for the acceptance of the insufferable that poverty breeds. The image she chooses to symbolize this enforced acceptance shocks, and she uses it several times: the 'dirty, sticky, perambulators with a teat stuck in the mouth to keep you quiet' (1983:8, 95, 107).

This refusal of suffering articulated a new or hitherto muted sentiment in feminism that then became one of the women's movement's most robust contributions to political reform. Nineteenth-century feminism, formed through abolitionism and philanthropy, its structure of feeling deeply, if diversely, religious, had identified with slaves and prostitutes producing an emotive collective self, part victim, part reformer—'the suffering sisterhood' addressed to Victorian lawmakers. But neither Woodward nor Woolf had any patience with suffering. The poor were not 'objects of pity' for Woolf, but people with stories to tell (Woolf 1993:95).¹⁹ Woodward, impatient for worlds far away from Jipping Street, despised the abjection of poverty, although by reiterating the phrasing and imagery of the King James Bible, her despair sometimes—in spite of herself—likened the 'lower classes' to Christ. Like the feminists and women's organizations in the 1920s, which were formulating policy to be rid of the conditions that bred suffering, these authors spoke from and contributed towards the mentality of reform. Poverty in their texts was an injustice that aroused anger, not a state of abjection or redemption that required an anguished identification.

Men and Power

Neither Woolf nor Woodward wanted to lead lives like men, nor did they put much faith in politics. England was ruled by a patriarchy, Woolf noted. The power to create law and wealth, to write books, conduct business, administer justice, lay with men—the fathers and husbands of her class. These professional men—rulers, soldiers, administrators, imperialists—all were constrained, their natures distorted by their traditions and education, just

18 Winifred Holtby has described Woolf's Bloomsbury study (1932:35).

19 See also the description of the Bethnal Green dressmaker's assistant, begging at the window of the Hogarth Press, in a diary entry of 'Friday 20 March 1936' (Woolf 1985:19), or the description of her former teacher, Janet Case (Woolf 1983:11). See also the footnote to Lily Wilson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's maid, Woolf 1933:105–9).

as women's were. Defying her own criteria for writing of genius by venting anger (that 'black snake') Woolf sketched a vicious psychology of men of power ('bred of the conditions of life, of the lack of civilisation') in a visceral image that belies the milder mockery of masculinity elsewhere in her writing. Patriarchs were driven by lust and rage, she believed,

but only at the cost of harbouring in their breasts an eagle, a vulture, for ever tearing the liver out and plucking at the lungs—the instinct for possession, the rage for acquisition which drives them to desire other people's fields and goods perpetually; to make frontiers and flags; battleships and poison gas; to offer up their own lives and their children's lives (1984:38).

Women of this class, without power or wealth, educated for two thousand years only by derision, charity and the conversation of the common sitting room, lacked these instincts of property; women were less culpable than men for the world they lived in—Woolf's sometimes 'inscrutable' society (1984:25).

Ten years later in *Three Guineas* (1938) Woolf did not let women off so lightly. If *Three Guineas* and *A Room* (written when Woolf was in her mid-forties and mid-fifties, respectively) are read together they represent a deepening of concern, and in 1936–7 the polemic was tougher on women. Now the issue was how to prevent war in the context of fascism.²⁰ Women's lack of education, property, status, independence had retrieved the mass of them from belligerent nationalisms, she ventures in *Three Guineas* ('... as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world')—but at a cost (1977:43–6, 125).²¹ Lack of education might relegate women to the 'outside' of culture beyond the 'stigma of nationality', but it more dangerously reduced women's capacity to think and so rendered them susceptible to violence.

A Room had been written at a moment when British feminists knew what they wanted and believed that the vote, an independent income and birth control might eventually deliver it. Earlier in the decade women, still grief-stricken by the death of men, feared another war; later, unemployment in the 1930s enforced a discipline on working women that chastened their sense of themselves in relation to men. Through both decades, lack of education and wealth and children kept women working as charwomen, nursemaids and 'always to be doing work that one did not wish to do, and to do it like a slave'. But for a few years in Britain—between the General Strike in 1926 and the Wall Street Crash of 1929 (*A Room* had been published a few days before the crash in October)—had come a moment of relative hope: an upswing in the economy, the extension of the franchise to women under thirty, and the election of a Labour government in 1929.

The 1930s were a more brutal decade—I have never dreamt so often of

20 Woolf conceived *Three Guineas* in the early 1930s, she began to write it in 1936, the first year of the Spanish Civil War. The *Three Guineas* were three letters in reply to requests for money to help defeat fascism. For a real letter written to Woolf by Monica Whateley, the president of the Six Point Group in 1935, see Alberti 1994:119.

21 In 1984:49–50, Woolf had claimed that women lacked the colonizing instinct: 'It is one of the great advantages of being a woman that one can pass even a very fine negress without wanting to make an Englishwoman of her.'

war', Woolf wrote to her nephew Julian Bell in May 1936 (1980:33)—and Woolf was harder on women. At the turn of the twentieth century, she argued, the daughters of educated men, desperate for occupation but with no profession except marriage, had used all their influence to 'bolster up the system'. Consciously—as, with maid, carriages and fine clothes, they went about their business—they desired 'our splendid empire' but unconsciously they desired war (1977:42–6). The need for all women to be educated to think for themselves, given the success of Nazism and other fascisms, was now, twenty years later, even more vital. Freedom of thought was the only weapon literary women had—educated as they had been by ridicule and derision, obscurity and poverty—to use against fascism, and the typewriter and duplicator enabled some to use it. The brilliance of Woolf's later polemic lies in the recognition of the umbilical cord she discerned between public and private despotisms 'the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other', a thought foreshadowed in *A Room* (1977:162, 199). Women's task was now monumental: to form a society of Outsiders, and to discover—not break—the law.

'Why does everyone bother me about politics?' Woolf wrote to her friend Ethel Smyth, the composer, as she complained in her letters and diaries through the second half of the 1930s about the many petitions and letters and monies she was invited to give to anti-fascist causes, and to which *Three Guineas* was her considered response (1980:112). She liked to think, as Hermione Lee has recently pointed out, that she left the formal politics to Leonard, her husband, who was a Fabian, the Labour spokesman on international and commonwealth affairs (and, like his wife, an internationalist).²² Woolf's refusal of politics may have been wilful; her remorseless ridicule of political men except Leonard was sometimes hilarious. She was scornful of the international writers' association PEN. Nevertheless Hermione Lee has reconstructed Woolf's extensive and careful research on fascism and Hitler's Germany for the *Three Guineas*, prompted in part by her continuing pacifism, at the same time that Leonard—like most of the left—moved from support for the League of Nations and Collective Security to the need for aggression against fascism.²³ Furthermore her diaries, letters and notebooks of the 1920s reveal the depth of her—sometimes disgruntled—interest in feminism, working-class movements and the relation between art and politics.²⁴

A suffragist since before the First World War, Woolf had held Women's Co-operative Guild meetings at her house in Richmond between 1916 and 1920.²⁵ In 1913, travelling the North of England with Leonard after her marriage, she had attended an AGM of the Guild where she noted 'the slow, emphatic gestures' of the delegates, their minds set on divorce law reform, taxation and land, the minimum wage, education, labour-saving appliances, housing and maternity 'Laws, which if passed would not touch a hair of my comfortable, capitalist head'.²⁶ She listened as friends,

22 From 1919 Leonard Woolf edited the new review, *War and Peace an International Review*; a reviewer for the *New Statesman* since 1914, he became its foreign editor in 1923 when John Maynard Keynes bought it (Wilson 1978).

23 Hermione Lee, lecture given at the 'Conference on Writers of the Thirties', The Voice Box, Festival Hall, London, May 1994.

24 Silver 1983. For the reaffirmation of her pacifism, see diary entry 'Friday 13 March' (Woolf 1985:17).

25 Letter to Benedict Nicolson (Woolf 1980:419–20); Holtby 1932:26–8.

26 Woolf's 'Introductory Letter', in Llewellyn Davies 1997:xvii–xxxxi.

Margaret Llewellyn Davies and others, described their work with the education of women. She read women's writings from the sixteenth century in preparation for her Cambridge lectures. She supported Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* (1929) against accusations of obscenity (balking only at describing it as great literature). If she liked lecturing no more than politics, it was because truth might not manifest itself in special pleading or conviction. Truth—as elusive as illusion, as susceptible as emotion to evaporation—might emerge in gossip or dreams, from the free play of fancy, even from lies ('I will speak lies', she warned readers of *A Room*), and one could never be sure which was more real—truth or illusion (1984:6, 19, 32, 100).²⁷

Reality itself was erratic and undependable and it was, she believed, accentuating the value of solitude again, the writer's not the politician's 'chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality'. The only discipline she urged on her young women writers on their way to £500 a year was to 'think of things in themselves', describe things as they are and not to shrink from describing what they saw. 'When I ask you to earn money and have a room of your own, I am asking you to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life . . .' (1984:104–5).²⁸

Men were scarcely addressed in *Jipping Street*. Men in Woodward's South London street were not powerful—they were unemployed, sick and unreliable, living on the peripheries of the women's lives. Shadowy, unknowable figures in Woodward's childhood, their presence erupts with sudden inexplicable violence: the beatings received by her mother, grandmother and her friend; the slit throat of a child on Clapham Common. Her father, a semi-invalid forced into a 'feminine' dependence that 'made his life an exquisite torment' puzzled her, but did not represent authority (1983:10–11). Neither did real men have much learning, though dead men's books opened new worlds, and with men she discussed the ideas that seized her imagination. Woodward's unstable, unpredictable men had one thing in common with Woolf's vulture-driven patriarchs—they were free to come and go. Women peopled the factory, workshop, hospital and workhouse, even the public house, working, managing money, kept in place by bearing and raising children. Women were no more the public face of Jipping Street than the women shut out of libraries and learning, confined to the common sitting room were the public face of Oxbridge in *A Room*, but then Jipping Street had no public face.

Politics and Sex

Woodward, like Woolf, rejected politics: it did not touch the lives of the poor as she knew them. In a chapter entitled 'Sons and Daughters of Revolt' she paints a portrait of the socialists—the only politicians interested in the

27 Cf. 1984:41, where she describes fiction 'like a spider's web, attached . . . to life at all four corners' but when we pull the web askew we find the webs are the 'work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.'

28 Cf. 'Why Art today follows Politics', first published in the *Daily Worker* in 1936 (Woolf 1993:133).

poor—as men and women of unrelenting seriousness with no complexities of thought in their ‘intemperate speech and violent intentions’ (1983:115). Driven to them by rage and despair, after a few months of ‘feverish’ activity on street corners and in her factory, she leaves them for her own uncertainties. The politics of socialism were too violent, too blindly Utopian, too unaware of the abjection and passivity of poverty to be able to change anything. Socialists never listened, never looked, so never understood the conditions they wanted to change. Her disillusionment with socialism becomes definitive when she tries to describe, in the course of a discussion on the uses of ‘hell to the capitalist through the clergy and priesthood’, her own and transfigured understanding of hell. First expounded to her, a frightened child, through the Mission and the Salvation Army, she overcame her fear by meditating on the redemptive power of God as love. Her words and exultation were met with derision and silence on the part of her audience. She felt angry and humiliated at the men’s response. Of all the outsiders who came to Jipping Street, only the young woman trade union organizer (probably based on Mary MacArthur of the National Federation of Women Workers, who organized the women factory workers, including Woodward herself, who had struck for higher wages in Bermondsey, South London in 1911) won respect because she listened and shared the women’s suffering.²⁹

Both authors chose solitude, silence and the aesthetic seduction of words and thoughts in place of politics. On some readings it seems as though they desired them also in place of women’s sexual destiny. Neither Woolf nor Woodward wanted to live lives like their mothers. Woolf was the most ambivalent. Tradition and memory made women see life differently from men, Woolf believed, and that difference was creative. ‘We’, meaning women writers, ‘think back through our mothers’, and that thinking could be generative of ‘words not yet syllabled’, of sentences not yet wrought, of histories to be written (1984:72). On the other hand, if femininity is potentially creative, the conditions in which it was lived militated against that creativity: too many children, as well as lack of wealth and education, stood in the way of women’s achievements, while heterosexual desire in the past had destroyed creativity, driven women to suicide or to the distortion of their thought. All the women writers of genius in the nineteenth century had been torn apart inside, Woolf wrote; and while almost nothing was known of women’s lives before the eighteenth century (when middle-class women began to write, a change more important than the Crusades, or the Wars of the Roses), Woolf’s guess was that the woman born with the gift of poetry had been—if not burnt for a witch or vilified—then an ‘unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself’ (1984:50, 62).

Few have written more accurately about the workings of the mind, its ‘severances and oppositions’, than Virginia Woolf. So tenuous was the link between the feminine mind and civilization, she thought, that even walking

29 Carolyn Steedman, ‘Introduction’, in Woodward 1983:x; Bentinck 1911

along the street in reverie might result in a 'sudden splitting off of consciousness' (1984:93).³⁰ Woolf, who opened her essays with the recognition that it was impossible to combine business with children, who always remembered the kitchen and the washing up when thinking of the 'unrecorded lives', remarked several times on the childlessness of women who wrote. On the other hand, for men, and one suspects for Woolf too, the boudoir, the nursery beckoned and seduced, promising refreshment and invigoration in the 'different order and system of life' to be found there (1984:53).³¹ Difference between the sexes was necessary for creative thought, it offered 'some stimulus, some renewal of creative power which is the gift only of the opposite sex to bestow'. The final image in *A Room* of a woman and man coming together in the street, leaping into a taxi and driving off leads to a fabulous peroration on androgyny. Just as love between two different people is creative, so too is the mind that combines both masculinity and femininity. Woolf's androgyny has been read both as 'avoidance' and as wholeness/completeness, but the sequences in *A Room* on the coming together of women and men—in the street or in the mind!—only just stops short at a paean to love between women and men, especially when 'unconscious' of their sex. At this point, Woolf, nothing if not evasive, is speaking of sentences, of Coleridge, of the 'mysteries of the mind'. Her evasiveness is symptomatic of a wider unease with the representation of the woman's body.³² Some years later she wrote that she had not been able to write the truth about the body, and she did not know why not.³³

Woodward shows how sexual difference was lived by the working classes in London before 1914—drudgery, illiteracy, life in damp, dark cellars without enough possessions, danger. If both authors railed against the impossibility of women having thoughts of their own, then, for Woodward, thinking stalled on the realities of women's lives, in particular her mother's. 'Fearless and without hope mother was', wrote Woodward,

flinty, enduring, strong, proud; she did not ask and she did not receive; the suffering had bitten in until it was itself impotent against the granite it laid bare . . .

Six children she reluctantly bore, and she was in the habit of saying in a curiously passionless tone that if she had known as much when her first child was born as she learned by the time she bore her sixth, a second child would never have been . . . She never lied about her feeling; she made no pretences; she said that all we had to do was to shut our mouths and go on.

Listening to mother, life seemed a long-drawn-out agony of uncertainty, rounded off by death and possibly the workhouse, which was worse than death (1983:99).

30 The Hogarth Press published the Standard Edition of Sigmund Freud's work, although Woolf claimed she did not read Freud until 1939 (see Abel 1989). *Three Guineas* speaks of men's 'infantile fixation', and she offers Creon, not Oedipus, as the epitome of paternal power against which she sets Antigone's search for the law. For a short discussion of the Woolf's response to psychoanalysis, see Goldstein 1974.

31 'One only has to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex sense of femininity to fly in one's face' (1984:83).

32 Stopes 1926 was the first medical textbook to give a diagram of a woman's reproductive system, so she claimed.

33 'Professions for Women' (1931), in Woolf 1992a:105).

Death haunted the imagination of the young woman and so did disgust and fear, as she learned the mysteries of sex, and 'shrank' from their ugliness and horror. 'The fact of motherhood awakened in me only emotions of disgust and recoiling.'

Masculinity and femininity are simply turned around in *Jipping Street*. Woodward contrasts her mother's grim endurance—inarticulate, shaped by nature—with her father's refinement and lack of manliness: 'Mother is saying he should have been a woman, for he is so delicate and ill and sensitive and anxious' (1983:15). Yet, in the body of the book it is her mother who speaks, not her father. Only once, from behind closed doors, she overhears her father moaning, questioning his plight. The women of *Jipping Street* spoke vividly, but of things and in an idiom that belonged to a state of mind and circumstances that Woodward, and many young women of her generation, wanted to leave behind. Woodward places both significant women of her childhood outside history: her mother—'nature bred her'—full of 'nameless apprehensions', knew only death, the landlord and want; Jessica Mourn, Woodward's beloved friend, the daughter of a brushmaker, imagined no future, she knew only the past, barren and forlorn (1983:27, 32).

History was on Kathleen Woodward's side. From the 1920s it became possible via the scholarship for the clever or literary girl to dream, as she was growing up, of becoming a writer, a journalist, an artist, an actress.³⁴ Entertainers and artists were expanding occupations for women between the wars in London, even if for the majority the reality was teaching, or moving in and out of shops, cafés and offices. These two books dramatize this dream, and the desire for work, for knowledge was a passion shared with many other women. In the gulf between Woolf's curiosity about the 'unrecorded lives' and *Jipping Street's* description of lives lived on the edge burned the ambition that drove young women to reject the mangles, the stays, and what they thought of as the ignorance and Victorian prudery of their mothers. Woodward may have believed that she was wishing a new wish, but both her mother and Jessica Mourn had themselves valued reading and writing, above all other capacities. Her mother's respect for her father's gentleness and breeding dwelt on his literacy. Jessica Mourn's lament that she could neither read nor write, her love for her own mother who could put more 'hooks and eyes on a story' than anyone she knew, her respect for her literate husband in spite of his brutality, imprinted the roots of a desire for something else in the child 'Kathleen's' mind more soundly than perhaps she knew (1983:33–4, 43).

These were unconscious memories. The shock of war had altered women's status; birth control and secondary schooling had raised women's expectations; the suffrage and the cinema educated women's desire; but their mothers' wishes lived in the minds of their daughters where they worked their alchemy too. Stoic their mothers may have been, but they wanted

34 15 per cent of young people continued in further education beyond fourteen; only a small proportion of those would have qualified for a scholarship (Holtby 1932:24). The County of London listed 3,860 actresses in 1921. See also Britain 1928:ch.5.

something else. Her mother was inarticulate, Woodward wrote, 'she had no love to give'—but the reader wonders:

My nose was small, and turned upwards. 'That' said mother drily, 'is all because I cuddled you too close to my breast when you were a baby' (1983:63).

The words Kathleen Woodward coveted in the silence and solace of her room were those of Gibbon, Emerson, Macaulay, poets and historians whose ways of thinking led her into a spiritual world. Woodward's lust for the 'ecstasy' of words and the excitement of the world of books was indifferent to the sex of their authors. Her generation of young women whose mothers were often barely literate—a source of frustration and shame—were simply hungry for learning. But the desires that make history don't just come from books, they have a deeper gestation in generational memory, the 'common life which is the real life', to borrow Woolf's phrase again (1984:108).

The wish in these two books, then, suggests a feminism that is more a state of mind, a common mentality than a political Utopia. Excluded from the worlds of men, refusing their mothers' lives, the authors required of women an inner change (Kathleen Woodward 'changed inside' after she had discovered the 'ugliness of sexual knowledge'; Virginia Woolf's 'splitting off of consciousness'). This necessary change in the self—always a feature of feminist thought—required enormous even violent energy. Before a woman can think, Woolf argued in a lecture given to the National Society for Women's Service in 1931, she must first murder the 'angel in the house' (1993:101–6).³⁵ And this inevitably involved killing part of oneself, because Woolf and Woodward, if their books tell us any truths about the feminine mind, had internalized that angel, an amalgam of their mothers' stoicism, duty and men's desire for women to mirror them. Only with that angel murdered could Woolf's 'incandescence', Woodward's 'beautiful words' be reached, but the risk was loss of sensuality, of the desire between the sexes, or even of any human relations.

The effect of women's new ambitions on the 'future of the race' (as almost everyone, and not just the Eugenics Society, thought about either the 'population question' or birth control) was discussed everywhere in the 1920s. Women writers pursued the dilemma, career and/or love, in fiction.³⁶ Men writers blamed the women's movement for the change in women's desires. Theirs was the most 'stridently sex-conscious age' Woolf conceded, suggesting that the suffrage movement had made it so. But in *Room* it was the death of men in the First World War, not feminism which had made 'romance' impossible: '... did the faces of men and women show so plain in each other's eyes that romance was killed?' (1984:16) War, by killing so many had wiped out illusion, and illusion was necessary for romance—whether lyric verse or love—between women and men.

35 Parker 1999 gives a more positive reading of this need.

36 E.g. Ellen Wilkinson's *Clash* (1929), Vera Brittain's *Honourable Estate* (1931). Cf. Johnson 1920:xxii.

If women's thinking grew out of the memories of their mothers, then both authors expose the limits of that maternal thought: it was sometimes empty or narrow, ugly with resentment and grief, deluged by the needs of others. The one unavoidable knowledge which women shared—sexual knowledge—provoked violent feelings and a wish for a change in the self. A room of one's own was a wish for solitude, for escape; for a refusal, or at least a suspension of femininity in a world in which the feminine body and its desires were often dangerous. The room represented a transitional space, a place to think—a remove to uncertainty and to the unknown. There is no clear vision of a future. As so often with feminist thought, the wish is for a break with the past, a resistance to culture and a change in human nature.

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